

**Statement of Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell, Co-Chairman  
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe  
Human Rights in Putin's Russia  
Thursday, May 20, 2004**

Mr. Chairman, today's Helsinki Commission hearing provides a timely opportunity to assess human rights and democratization in the Russian Federation in advance of President Putin's visit to the United States in conjunction with the G-8 summit in early June. Much has transpired in Russia since the Commission last met on developments in Russia, including parliamentary and presidential elections that have consolidated President Putin's position as the undisputed Russian leader.

His power further consolidated by December's flawed parliamentary elections and his overwhelming mandate in similarly flawed presidential elections in March, his position has been secured. The question before us is how President Putin will wield his considerable power to shape Russia domestically and internationally. Will Putin seek to advance democracy, human rights and the rule of law, or thwart such change?

At home, President Putin's stated objective is to build a "united Russia." If this is to be more than a mere slogan, he will have to choose between pursuing this goal by either fostering freedom or resorting to force –i.e. embracing elements of pluralistic civil society or marginalizing, if not eliminating, them.

A rapidly shrinking independent media, actions against human rights and pro-democracy NGOs, and manipulations of elections give rise for concern. President Putin is well positioned to reverse these troubling trends. Russia's OSCE commitments offer a better blueprint for progress and prosperity than does the misguided notion of so-called "managed democracy", popular among some political circles close to Putin.

A recent Moscow municipal court ruling effectively banning the religious activities of the local community of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian capital is also troubling. This case should set off alarm bells for members of other religious minorities in Moscow and beyond. There has also been heightened rhetoric by Russian officials with frequent references to so-called "traditional religions." In fact, the Commission has learned that drafts are circulating in the State Duma, Russia's parliament, that would extend preferential status to "traditional religions." These developments along with increased activity by registration committees raise serious concerns over the status of individuals belonging to minority religious communities in Russia.

The situation in Chechnya – the subject of a Commission hearing last fall – remains a deep concern given the egregious violations of international humanitarian law in the part of Russia. President Putin's efforts to manipulate political developments in Chechnya have failed to move the region toward normalization, as evidenced by the recent assassination of his hand picked leader for the region. Besides addressing the grave humanitarian situation in Chechnya, President Putin should move to allow the Chechen people to have a voice and choice in their future, while preserving the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation.

In his inaugural address earlier this month, President Putin spoke of the importance of a “mature civil society.” He continued, “only a free people in a free country can be successful...we will do everything to ensure that a real multi-party system develops in Russia and the individual liberties of citizens are strengthened...” Mr. Chairman, while we would all agree with President Putin on the importance of freedom, it is hard to reconcile his rhetoric with the actions of his first administration. Manipulation of electronic media by the Kremlin has done more to undermine multi-party democracy in Russia than foster its further development. Similarly, the levers of state power have also been manipulated to come down hard on those who have been critical of Putin or his policies.

Mr. Chairman, it is too early to determine how President Putin will wield his considerable power in his second term to shape Russia domestically and internationally and whether he will reverse the troubling trends that were the trademark of the first.